

# Middle East & South Asia

## HISTORY AND CUSTOMS

The ancient ruins of Turkey, the Maharajahs of India, the Arab Sheiks, the nomadic tribes one heard about as a child, the biblical lands and all the other historic countries of this region bring excitement to mind. Be prepared for many new and unfamiliar ways. What we think of as "human nature" may not be the accepted custom elsewhere and vice versa. For example, Moslem men are frequently very emotional and love poetry, while women are steady and clearheaded.

The women are still very reserved socially and have not yet reached equal status with men. Many are still veiled (purdah), although this is changing in many places. In Saudi Arabia, women are not even allowed to drive.

You may find that people in these areas do not



like to have their pictures taken, especially the women, so be sure you ask permission before snapping a picture with your camera. Do not admire a possession of a host friend, because you might be pressed to take it as a gift. Gifts are thanked with gifts.

Be aware that there are different attitudes toward time in this part of the world, and expecting a deadline to be met will cause frustrations. One must check again and again in order to get simple repairs accomplished.

*For more information contact the  
Relocation Assistance Program  
located at your nearest  
Family Service Center*



## RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES

In countries that are predominantly Moslem, religion pervades all of life. The Koran, the Moslem Holy Book, lays down very explicit rules for its people. You could hardly be expected to learn them all, but a few tips will help you avoid embarrassment or prevent misunderstandings. On visiting a mosque, shoes are removed and placed on the floor, soles down or together but never so that the sole of the shoe is up. Times of prayer are announced by the muezzin's call from the mosque tower.

Moslems do not eat pork in any form. Food is eaten only with the right hand. Because the left hand is reserved for sanitary functions. Avoid offering an object or pointing to anyone with this hand. Avoid eating or smoking in public during the religious festival or Ramadan and avoid public gatherings at this time as well. Alcohol is forbidden.

In some of these regions, the ancient Hindu religion is also completely enmeshed in the everyday lives of the people. Conservative dress is best and no casual clothes are worn outside of your own home except to participate in a sport. There are many food taboos (generally no beef is eaten), but it is best for anyone going to these countries to find out the preference of each particular region or sect. Never be afraid to ask because it is considered a courtesy when you try to please. One should avoid physical contact, including the shaking of hands or embracing. Bowing with the hands placed together, fingers upward, is a more accepted form of greeting. The caste system has been outlawed in a few countries, but tradition takes a long time to die out anywhere.

There are many differences between our culture and those of the Middle East and South Asia, but they can be bridged with the right attitude and the desire to understand and tolerate. Perhaps some of their philosophies of life can show us how to bring more tolerance into our own lives.